

*My experiences
in camp life*

William Penner

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My experiences in camp life

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Foreword

I put these experiences down as close as I could remember. They have been very precious to me. I hope it will be of benefit to young and old alike.

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When World War II started in late summer of 1939, I happened to work at my uncle's place in Rosenort. We surely didn't know what this would all take. It created quite a lot of worry in me. One thing I couldn't understand was, "Why does this war have to start exactly when I am 21?"

As time went on we sort of got used to it. I even went along to Conference in Kansas in November. The U.S.A. wasn't involved at that time.

I was quite optimistic about the whole thing. I never read very much. However in the fall of 1940 things began to happen. In September we young men were advised to each write a letter to the officials concerning our C.O. standing. Meanwhile the church leaders of the Mennonites had offered the authorities that the young men would be willing to serve the Government in alternative service, such as different work in national parks.

In mid-December of the same year a hearing was called and we boys with our fathers and one minister were asked to appear before the judge. We went to Ste. Anne Municipal Hall on the second floor. That building still stands and I often think of it when I see it or go in and pay tax and such like. It felt rather strange, as though our liberties were being slowly taken away from us. I was called to the front with my father, the late P. A. Penner and Minister John M. Penner. Judge Adamson made me promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He showed me the letter I had sent in September and asked whether it was my writing. I said, "It looks like it." He asked kind of sharply, "Any doubts about it?" I really had no trouble getting my request granted. The judges would be very easy on some of the boys and on others quite severe.

After two months I was married to Adina and for awhile I felt like putting far away the evil day. We had our plans and yet with things shaping up we could expect that it wouldn't be so easy.

In June 1941 the 21-year-olds were called to service for four months. My brother Dave was in that number. He went to Clear Lake together with quite a number. This made me aware of the

probability of being called to camp too. He came home in due time. Shortly after that we decided to apply for serving my four months in winter so we would be ready to farm in spring. I went to Minister Jac. F. Barkman with this and he put it down like this. If at all in '42 then my choice would be in winter.

So, Brothers Dave Toews, Martin Barkman and myself were called to be at the Winnipeg bus depot close to T. Eatons at 6 a.m. January 15th, 1942. When I look back it seems we young couples were very numb to what really was in store for us. The bus picked up more boys as we travelled on through Morris, Rosenfeld, Horn-dean, Plum Coulee, Winkler and Morden, about 40 in number. We got our dinner at Killarney, and from there we headed towards Clear Lake, through Brandon. We got to our destination about 6:30 p.m. We had travelled 300 miles that day.

Dave Toews, Martin Barkman and myself, with most of the others, were taken right through to Camp 1 about six miles east of the lake. We had two long bunk houses with double bunk beds which kept about seventy boys altogether. I still felt very numb. We were treated good. We had lots to eat. It felt rather strange in the beginning and this we realized more after a while. We had a certain amount of worship service which was pretty well kept up in the beginning but dwindled down as time went on. I know I longed very much to gather at home with loved ones and my own brothers and sisters in faith. By this I possibly didn't even appreciate the fellowship with others as much as I could have.

Our main work there was to clean out the bush of dry and fallen brush and trees along each side of the three-mile road from the highway to a small lake.

About March 20 David Toews was discharged because of ill health. So this left Martin and me alone from our church. Kind relatives brought our wives down a few times. We could then get a leave for the weekend, rent a place in the motel, and get refreshed for the days ahead. One Monday, after Adina was gone and I was at work, one of my buddies made a remark, "William is smiling". That time I had the grace to be glad for her coming, enjoyed ourselves while she was there, and happy afterwards that she had been there.

I couldn't always take it that way. Many times it looked dark. Martin and I would often go for a walk and talk things over.

On April 1 fifteen of us were sent to another camp where they needed help to work on a project, building a breakwater. This was at Waskesiu in Prince Albert National Park. This was the lonliest place for me. No visitors. Seven hundred miles from home. No ministers. On top of that we were told to go there for two weeks, and it took over five till we got back. Many a time I was confronted with the question, "Why me?" when others could be home with their loved ones. One time I got so far that I drew a picture of our little house back home. That was the closest I could get outside of letter writing, which we were faithful in. We still could say we were treated very well. We didn't even need to work very hard. I made up my mind if only I could go home I would be willing to go to church with the horse and buggy. I'm afraid I haven't always kept this good intention. The old nature still bothers me.

On April 15 when we boys came in from work at noon the timekeeper told us he had sad news for us. Conscientious objectors were going to be retained or recalled for the duration of the war. That was a blow. Only one month till we were going to go home and say goodbye to camp life. Why had I volunteered to leave home at this time? We had been counting days both behind us and ahead of us in these four months. We were beginning to see the end, and honestly, time seemed to go faster. We sure studied that word D-U-R-A-T-I-O-N. We looked it up in the dictionary to see whether there wasn't a loophole. We found none. It meant just that. We walked on dry streets one quarter mile to work on the edge of the lake. We had nice food to eat. I would have gladly exchanged this for tramping in the mud at home and doing chores. It was quite a testing time for us. Sometimes I was too dissatisfied. Why couldn't I put this all in God's hand?

We fifteen were finally sent back to Clear Lake again to the same Camp we had been before. Again a lonesome situation with most of the boys gone West. We settled down and tried to make the best of it.

The first weekend Adina's folks brought her and my folks to visit with me. It was real refreshing. We had a service in one camp. "Tell Me the Story of Jesus" was one song we sang and it still rings in my ears. I especially took note that there are two sides in life. The bright and the dark. When we look to Jesus, what he had all done and suffered for us, our light afflictions were easy to bear. On the other side it was quite the contrary. On this particular Saturday night my mother and mother-in-law went to ask the Park Superintendent if he couldn't let me go home. I would have liked to hold them back but my father said, "Let them try." The request was not granted.

One day two of us were digging a well at Whirlpool Lake. I was filling the bucket ten feet down and my friend was on the ground. The foreman came around and asked my friend, "What! Is he singing for water?" I admit I was in deep meditation far above that hole in the earth.

The authorities had promised that we could go home for a short time after six months of service. Two and a half weeks before that time we heard sad news again. It was Thursday night and we were told that most of us were going to be sent to the West Coast. We should leave on the C.P.R. at Brandon on the following Monday. However, if we wished, we could phone home and ask our parents, etc. to come and visit us during the weekend. None of us boys should cross the park boundaries.

It was a hard lot to take. Different accusations came forth. Was it required of us to take this? Couldn't we do something about it? I personally had to get reconciled to that deal and by God's help I could do it. It was the main theme that evening. I told one of the boys that if we wanted to be nonresistant I believed we should accept our lot patiently. As long as I took this attitude it was amazing how I could rejoice in this tribulation. We were riding in the back of a truck and most of the boys were grumbling and scolding. I turned away and started singing. I felt so sorry for them.

A number of us went to Wasagaming that evening and phoned home telling them the latest, inviting them to come and see us. By Friday night one carful had come to see me. Another three cars

came on Saturday. I enjoyed that weekend very much. There were lots of cabins to rent. We had services on Sunday. We visited and sang. It was truly refreshing. My mother-in-law noticed that I was quite happy yet. I replied, "Why shouldn't I smile when I see so many near and dear ones, about twenty-five?"

One of my brothers-in-law, a father of two, offered to take my place for awhile if we could make the arrangement. I had no desire to try it since I had become willing for this and I was afraid it would soften my zeal.

Monday morning came and we boys were permitted to ride along in our relatives' cars to Brandon depot, about sixty miles. Another thing to be happy for. All of my company had our dinner outside on the grass and then came the farewell. What would the future hold? Would we ever see each other again?

Thirty-nine C.O.'s and one minister, a Mr. Friesen, from Lowe Farm got into one passenger train coach. Number 40 was missing, disappeared. The black steamer took us rapidly across the prairies. Mr. Friesen wanted me to help him with English. His language was rather poor but otherwise he tried to keep us happy. By Tuesday morning we came to Calgary. Some of us stepped off and met Minister Jac. F. Barkman, who gave us a few instructions as to what we would likely meet up with. We got back into the C.P. coach and so were on our way. From there on I saw many things I had never seen before. I frankly enjoyed it, amidst the heartaches. The water in the Bow River came rushing east as we went west. Beautiful mountain scenery caught my eyes. Deep ravines, forests, steep cliffs and so on. I just looked and looked and looked. I got quite a headache. All at once the News Agent comes along with a big bunch of sunglasses and let us all try them. Would they really give them to us? No, not quite. He came around again to sell them for \$1.00 a pair and I think he sold quite a number. After all, that meant two days' work. I'll explain this right here. We got fifty cents a day for every day of the month. January pay meant \$15.50 while a month like April was \$15.00.

As I was beholding God's wonderful creation I had these thoughts. Now I see a very narrow strip across western Canada.

The almighty God has created all this plus very much more in just one week and yet mankind in general don't really want to believe in Him. Could I only be a help to some poor soul who was in darkness. We thirty-nine and I were left pretty much to ourselves in the coach. But as we came close to Revelstoke a conductor and one or two others came and sat close to me. I had my one leg over my other knee. He told me to take my big shoe out of the way. I remember this was a test for me. I tried to take it patiently. The bright summer sun went behind the mountains and soon it was night. The black monster kept on going. We surely couldn't rest properly. As morning came we were going along the north side of the Frazer River, roughly fifty miles on this side of Vancouver. I believe I felt a little shaky. What will be next for us? At 8 a.m. we got off at Coquitlam. If I remember right they took us with all our baggage into two buses. Off we went to the receiving center at Green Timbers, New Westminster. About twelve miles. We were taken in very nicely. As we registered I tried to find a way to go to one of the camps on Vancouver Island where I could be together with some of our church brethren. I couldn't find any cooperation from the time keeper. So I finally gave up the idea. Now this was Wednesday, July 1, 1942. After a day or so we gradually started to work cutting down weeds and small brush close to the No. 1 highway. As I looked around I noticed quite a difference from life on the prairies. One evening at sunset somebody told me to look east and a little south. There I saw a pink-looking mound. This is Mount Baker in Washington. What a sight!

We stayed at Green Timbers till the next Monday. Bill, the truck driver, came to eight of us Manitoba boys and asked us to go along with him to work a day at Vedder Crossing. A little while later he came and said, "Take all your baggage because you are going to stay there." That was all the information we got.

Off we went in the back of a two-ton Ford truck. The weather was nice. Some of the boys had been visiting at relatives on Sunday and brought some fresh red cherries which they shared with us. Away we drove into the unknown, east along No. 1 Highway almost to Chilliwack, then south to Vedder Crossing, over the Vedder River and two and one half miles along an old logging railway. The

tracks had been taken off. The ties were still in. There was a little clearing where we erected a campsite. We could hear the rushing of the river a little ways north. There was a steep hill about 300 feet high to the south. During the shortest days later on the sun could not be seen at noon.

The first night here we slept in the open air. It could be quite warm during the day but it always cooled off for the night. We soon had several bunkhouses set up 12' x 16' with two windows and one door. It was a nice location. As time went on we slowly got used to it. More C.O.'s from Green Timbers were sent out there. We were boys from five different provinces, B.C. to Ontario. It was quite a mixed group. There were also a number of different churches represented. One day in that B.C. forest we heard a cow moo. Now that sure sounded nice. It was maybe a mile away. When we went to the river and looked across to the north we saw a few small holdings where people lived. There was a large army camp at Vedder Crossing. We sometimes even heard some noise from there. They had a demolition area roughly one half mile south or just behind that 300 foot hill. Here they would practise anything from bashing around with machinery to using explosives. This felt rather dangerous at times. We felt rather small in comparison to that army camp. I believe that very few of the general public knew anything about us at all. The camp would be hard to find. Our main job was to tear out the old railway ties, cut the brush on each side and when the rains started in late September we burned all that rubbish. We covered a stretch of about seven miles that summer. There was the odd saw log about 3½ by 40 feet long lying alongside as these had apparently fallen off the railway or just not been picked up. We cut some of these with long cross-cut saws and then split the chunks with wedge and sledge and finally with axes. This served as firewood for the large camp cook stoves. For awhile my job was to file those saws.

One day Uncle John M. Penner came to visit us. He was looking after the C.O. camps all over Vancouver Island and the few that were on the mainland. That night I spent with him alone in a bunkhouse and we had a lot to talk over.

In mid-August Adina and her sister came to see me. They

arrived by train on Sunday. I set out on a bike to find them somewhere between Camp and Chilliwack. As I pedalled a little way north of that army camp I saw P. I. Reimer from Greenland come walking in my direction. What a meeting. He came with me as I had better show up at camp. After awhile, as we were visiting on the side of that trail close to camp, I said "here they come". Adina and Roselin. They had quite a time to find us. I remember Brother Reimer wishing us the needed courage in our present afflictions. He soon went on his way. The other two went to some friends at Sardis and found a job picking hop for a few weeks. During this time I went over there a few times. It was an eight mile bike ride. After Roselin went home, Adina and I rented a cabin at Cultus Lake, only three miles from camp. I often walked that distance before breakfast and after supper. It took me 45 minutes in the beginning and after three months, just when we could finally go home on leave, I walked that same distance in 36.5 minutes without running.

I'll go back a little now. One day, about September 1, we got an airmail letter from my sister Margaret telling us that Albert Wohlgemuth had been instantly killed by a bolt of lightning. That was quite a shock to me. I told my camp pals about it. The remark was made that now that cousin of mine would at least not need to come there.

One of my friends, Ben Rempel from Morden, also had his wife come out, who also stayed at Cultus Lake. Later, around October 1, Martin and Selma Barkman with their little Denton came to join us. So there were three C.O.'s wives living close together in a tourist park.

Around September 20 about twenty of us were asked to go fire fighting on the mountainside east of Cultus Lake. I write as though I knew my directions. We had different experiences in that way. It appeared as though the sun could rise in the west and so on. We usually knew whether we went up or down. Okay. We fire fighters packed up and rode on the truck for four miles, climbing considerably the last stretch till we came to the end of the road. It was quite smoky. We divided all the tools, food and blankets between us

and climbed that mountain with packs on our backs. We climbed a thousand feet in one hour. We often had to grab the branch of a small tree or else we would slip. Our foreman, Charlie, and an experienced fire fighter were with us. While climbing I noticed my knee which had been bruised almost four years earlier and thoroughly healed up was hurting again.

When we started working with our mattocks and shovels it felt rather restful. We soon gathered 'round the grub box and had our supper of number one camp-baked bread, butter, cold meat, and hot tea. No gentle table manners but did that ever satisfy our hungry appetites.

The plan was to go under the fire and work away the combustible material, a two-and-a-half foot strip, and if a big tree was in our way we had to cut it and if we couldn't move it we would make two cuts so the fire wouldn't burn over our trail. The worst obstacles were the dry standing trees. Most of them appeared to be leaning towards lower altitudes. Blazing chunks from way up on those trees would drop down way under our trail and we had to make another trail under that. The slope we were working on must have been from fifteen to thirty degrees. That first evening we worked awhile and finally tried to retire on our blankets when suddenly Charlie remarked, "Who was it? Jacob who had his head on a stone? Yes, that's right." A little while later we heard the fire crackling under us. That caused alarm and we took our blankets and went farther down to a safer place. The next day we went back and saw that all the wooden handles had burned and the tools had lost their temper. Good that we had moved for sleeping.

For the second night we went still farther down. I remember seeing a dry tree about 150 feet high all aglow right to the top. What a sight. We sang a few songs out in the open smoky evening air. One was "When My Life Work is Ended and I Cross the Swelling Tide." I wish you could have heard that. Charlie organized us to be watchmen all through the night. We changed off in two hour shifts, two at a time. It took some extra nerve to go and watch the fire while the others were sleeping.

After this, most of us went back to camp for the night and took turns in going up to the mountain to watch the fire. We had lots of time to visit with each other. I got into the mood of singing one German song after another as well as I knew them by memory. This caught the attention of Henry Unger from Blumenhof, Man. He asked me where I got all that from. I replied, this was what my father taught us, mostly in evening devotions.

When the game warden took us to camp after the second night on the mountain I begged him to stop in at Cultus Lake because my overalls had holes. This gave me a wonderful chance to tell Adina why I hadn't showed up for a few days. I hurried back to the waiting gang. One remark was made, "That's the guy with official pull."

We spent about one week with this fire fighting. One day Charlie remarked, "Boys, you should pray for rain." I guess he must have figured it would help more than if he would pray. Anyway, it slowly started drizzling and finally the fire died out.

There were many Mennonites living around Sardis and Yarrow. One Sunday a Mr. Thiessen came and got Martin Barkmans and us to spend the day with them. We attended church in the forenoon, a wedding in the afternoon and a song service in the evening. It was a nice change for all of us.

On Thanksgiving we three couples decided to walk up the mountain where we had worked two weeks back. Lunch was packed and we started out walking, I would guess two miles to the end of the road, mostly uphill. We got real tired. We changed off carrying two children. The smoke had disappeared and we could look down and see the lovely scenery in the Frazer Valley. I never got too much of that. Walking down was easier on the body but rather tiresome on our feet.

One day as Martin and I were walking to camp for breakfast, our supervisor from Green Timbers gave us a ride and said we sure must have gotten up early. Martin told him he too must have done the same thing.

About December 1, most of the boys, including our foreman, were sent to other camps. Martin, Abe, our truck driver; a cook and myself were left to gradually move our camp buildings five miles east along that old logging railroad. They left us a truck. One official said to another one, "What do you know, by morning those four C.O.'s may be in Alberta." We had no intentions of that but were a little surprised at the confidence they had in us.

It took us quite a while to get all those bunkhouses taken apart, loaded up and hauled away and then put them up again at the new place. The Vedder River runs west and the Tamahi comes from the mountains in the south, bends to the right and runs into the Vedder. That created a sharp triangle and right there is where we were supposed to set up camp for the next year. The rivers were a bit high and just before we retired for the first night we noticed the water was running across the driveway which sort of closed us in with water all around. Someone had told us that about eight years back they had water nine feet deep right there. Abe said he had the truck ready and in case of danger we would all get on and get out of here. Morning came and nothing happened.

On December 9, I got a two-week vacation. Adina and I boarded the C.N.R. at Chilliwack and went home to Greenland. We moved right into our little house and tried to enjoy ourselves for the short time. It was a very nice change. We had revival meetings just then. It felt like filling up our empty tanks. Did I ever appreciate my home folks, relatives and surroundings. A deep longing for extending our stay caused us to beg the officials for it. We went to the Law Courts Building in Winnipeg, and sure enough, they listened. So it was postponed to right after New Years.

The day came and parting was hard. I can still remember how I saw my mother standing there in the kitchen with a smile. That was the very last time I saw her. Her concerns and worries about her sons would soon be over. Dad took Adina and me to the depot in Winnipeg. We travelled on and came to our destination two days later. New battles to face. A strange feeling came over me, namely, we would go home soon again. I was thinking possibly my father would be gone. We settled down and tried to do our duties. We

often felt rather inadequate to face our problems. Adina and Selma were at Cultus Lake, which was now all of seven miles from camp. January 18, as we four were at the supper table, Mr. Mahood, the Game Warden, brought me a message. My mother had died the day before and they expected us to come home. Our tickets were prepaid. I packed a few things and went along with Mr. Mahood. A little later Abe came and took us to Chilliwack. We just made it and started off homeward. That night they had three feet of snow in the Frazer Valley. The train was losing time all the way. It was really cold on the Prairies. They even hitched the second steamer on level ground. By the time we came to Winnipeg we were seventeen hours late. Adina's father had kindly waited for us at the Union Depot. We hurried off and he took us directly to my folks where the family and relatives were gathered around the casket. There we saw my mother and my feeling became clear to me. I don't remember much of the funeral. Now Father was left with four children, eighteen and up, to keep home fires burning.

After two weeks we were to go back again. We took the C.N.R. again. By this time we were very tired of riding on the train. The fourth time through the Rockies in about seven weeks. Martin and I soon took our wives right to the new campsite. Many times life seemed rather dull and pointless. As I look back I can see that often I did not take the right attitude. After all God had a place for us to fill and a duty to do. One time Uncle and Aunt John M. Penners came to pay us a visit. Another time Min. Isaac Toews came to see us. I think it was Easter Monday and we all, including Minister Toews went for a walk farther east several miles. We had dinner along and had a nice time. We came to a pack bridge on the Vedder River. This bridge was built of two long logs 150 feet and three feet at the butt end with planks crosswise, under these logs and lighter logs lengthwise under the planks all tied up with cables. It was a single span bridge too narrow for trucks. We stood on the bridge looking over the main logs onto the river about sixty feet down. We had many things to pass the time outside of our work: singing, letter writing, etc. I built several cedar chests with very primitive tools. I helped Martin build a small cabin for them to live in. We made shakes from dry cedar and put them on the roof. We put up a tent for us since about thirty boys were coming to stay at our camp.

One day Martin told me he had seen a bear and immediately we decided not to tell this to our wives. I tried hard to keep it to myself but felt very jittery when we would go for a walk. Soon Martin and Selma went home on farm leave and we moved into their cabin. Then one morning, as I got up, I looked out of the window and there I saw the bear about thirty feet away. I made a little noise and it ran into the bush. A few days later he showed up again and would not be scared away from me. The campsite was a little ways off. The bear started to trouble them, too. Charlie, the foreman, got tired of this and shot him.

We didn't know what the future held for us. I tried getting a farm leave and finally it was granted. May 11, 1943 we said good-bye. I had always wanted to tour a plywood factory but it mattered nothing now. We were taken to the depot at Chilliwack with our belongings and went back to good old Manitoba.

P.S. In October, 1960 we took our oldest boy, age six, and travelled to Waskesiu, Saskatchewan in our own car. Then to Alberta and British Columbia to see the old familiar places. We noticed the small trees had grown fast, but the big ones not so much. The mountains had not grown any smaller.

— William Penner —

